

## Dr. Seuss's Anti-Nazi Parables

By Mark I. West, University of North Carolina at Charlotte

In the summer of 1936, Theodore Seuss Geisel, now known as Dr. Seuss, and his first wife, Helen Palmer Geisel, travelled to Europe where they visited Germany among other countries. He was thirty-two at the time and had already achieved considerable success as the creator of a popular advertising campaign for an insecticide called Flit. The substantial income he derived from his work in advertising made such trips possible. He and Helen always took great pleasure in their frequent and extensive excursions, and they were looking forward to this European excursion. He had visited Germany before and had enjoyed the experience. As a German-American, Seuss felt a certain affinity with the German people, so he fully expected to enjoy this visit, too. However, his 1936 visit to Germany proved to be a disturbing experience for Seuss and his wife. The rise of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party appalled him. Seeing the impact of Nazism first-hand persuaded Seuss that Hitler posed a grave danger not only to Germany but also to the wider world (Morgan & Morgan 79-80; West 54).

When Seuss returned home to America, he felt compelled to respond to this danger. Philip Nel, an expert on Dr. Seuss's work, argues that Seuss's response to the rise of Nazism and the outbreak of World War II played a transformative role in Seuss's life. In an article published in *Mosaic* in 2001, Nel examines this transformation and concludes that in many ways World War II "created Dr. Seuss." As Nel states in his article, "Seuss's work in the fight against Fascism both galvanized his commitment to various social issues and motivated him to write books that encourage readers to challenge certain structures of power" (Nel 66). Two such books are *Yertle the Turtle*, published in 1958, and *The Sneetches*, published in 1961.

*Yertle the Turtle* and *The Sneetches* attracted little attention when they first came out. However, in the late 1990s researchers began writing about how these two books relate to Seuss's work from the 1940s. Art Spiegelman led the way with a 1999 article in the *New Yorker* titled "Horton Hears a Heil." Soon thereafter Richard H. Minear commented on these books in his conclusion to *Dr. Seuss Goes to War: The World War II Editorial Cartoons of Theodor Seuss Geisel* (259-266). Nel wrote about these connections in his *Mosaic* article as well as in his 2004 book, *Dr. Seuss: American Icon* (39-62). Spiegelman and Minear both make the case that *Yertle the Turtle* and *The Sneetches* can be read as

historical allegories related to Adolf Hitler and the rise of Nazism. However, the stories can also be read as political parables. When read as parables, these picture books can be seen as transcending the grim historical realities of the Nazi era.

Seuss's concern about the rise of Hitler led him to leave the world of advertising and become a political cartoonist. He began creating political cartoons for the leftist newspaper *PM*, which was published in New York City between 1940 and 1948. At first Seuss simply submitted cartoons on a freelance basis. His first *PM* appeared in January 1941, but soon thereafter he became a regular contributor to *PM* and he continued in this role until 1943 (Minear 11-12).

Seuss used his cartoons to skewer the European Fascists as well as the American isolationists, such as Charles Lindbergh. During this period, Lindbergh made many pro-Hitler statements (Nagorski 200-207), and Seuss found these statements to be especially repugnant. In his cartoons dealing with the Fascist leaders in Europe, he ridiculed many of the political and military officials in Germany and Italy, but he focused most of his attention on Hitler. As Judith and Neil Morgan state in *Dr. Seuss & Mr. Geisel: A Biography*, Seuss's "ultimate scorn was aimed at Adolf Hitler, whom he drew for *PM* as an arrogant, incorrigible infant in diapers" (102).

In 1943, Seuss joined the military and was assigned to Frank Capra's signal corps. During his time in the service, he participated in the production of biweekly newsreels. He also contributed to some longer films designed to promote the war effort, including *Your Job in Germany*, a film intended for the American troops who were sent to occupy Germany after the fall of Hitler (Morgan & Morgan 110).

Seuss's career as a children's author blossomed during the post-war years. He had published a handful of children's books before this time, but the post-war years marked his arrival as a major player in the children's literature world. Between 1947 and 1961, he published sixteen picture books, including several of his most famous works, such as *Bartholomew and the Oobleck* (1949), *Horton Hears a Who!* (1954), *The Cat in the Hat* (1957), and *One Fish Two Fish Red Fish Blue Fish* (1960). In most of his books from this period, Seuss did not explicitly express his concerns about Fascism, but these concerns still exerted a subtle influence on his work. Nel points out, for example, that Seuss's concern about the dangers associated with tyrannically leaders, such as Hitler, is reflected in his the portrayal of King Derwin in *Bartholomew and the Oobleck*. As Nel puts it in his *Mosaic* article, "Not only is the King a megalomaniac, but also his ambitions mire his country in chaos and pain, a view that perfectly coincides with Seuss's view of Hitler" (Nel 77). However, it was not until Seuss set to work on *Yertle the*

*Turtle* in 1957 that he deliberately wrote a book in response to Nazism and the dangers associated with fascist movements in general.

At the same time that Seuss was working on this book, a growing number of American intellectuals were beginning to write about the historical significance of the Holocaust and the Nazi regime. Kristen Fermaglish discusses this development in *American Dreams and Nazi Nightmares: Early Holocaust Consciousness and Liberal America, 1957-1965*, and she argues that the late 1950s marked a turning point in Americans willingness to “connect the Holocaust to contemporary American life” (1). Thus, it is possible that Seuss may have been responding to a larger zeitgeist related to Americans’ changing perceptions of Nazism and the Holocaust and the lessons to be learned from this dark period in world history.

In Jonathan Cott’s *Pipers at the Gates of Dawn: The Wisdom of Children’s Literature*, Cott provides an account of a conversation he had with Seuss. At one point in this conversation, Seuss stated explicitly that *Yertle the Turtle* “was modeled on the rise of Hitler” (Cott 29). He elaborated on this point in an interview with Cynthia Gorney from *The Washington Post*. In her article, Gorney provides the following account of the origins of *Yertle the Turtle*:

One afternoon in 1957, as he bent over his big drawing board in his California studio, Theodor Seuss Geisell found himself drawing a turtle.

He was not sure why.

He drew another turtle and saw that it was underneath the first turtle, holding him up.

He drew another, and another, until he had an enormous pileup of turtles, each standing on the back of the turtle below it and hanging its turtle head, looking pained.

Geisel looked at his turtle pile. He asked himself, not unreasonably, “What does this mean? Who is the Turtle on top?”

Then he understood that the turtle on top was Adolf Hitler (Gorney B1).

*Yertle the Turtle* tells the story of Yertle, a turtle king who rules the “far-away Island of Sala-ma-Sond.” In the beginning of the story, he sits on a stone in the middle of a pond and presides over all that he sees from this stone throne. However, he soon decides his kingdom is too small. Since he considers himself to be the ruler of all that he sees, he embarks on a plan to elevate his throne so that he can see further and thus have a bigger kingdom. He accomplishes this goal by commanding nine turtles to stand on each other’s backs, and then he perches on top of this “nine-turtle stack.” He repeats this over and over again until the turtle stack soars into the sky. The story concludes with the turtle on the bottom

of the stack finally objecting to Yertle's plan for world domination. This turtle brings down Yertle with the simple act of burping. The story concludes with the following lines:

And today the great Yertle, that Marvelous he,  
Is the King of the Mud. That is all he can see.  
And the turtles, of course . . . all the turtles are free  
As turtle and, maybe, all creatures should be. (n. pag)

Not long after Seuss finished *Yertle the Turtle*, he began work on *The Sneetches*. Seuss saw these two books as a pair, and in several interviews, he mentioned both books in the same sentence. Like *Yertle the Turtle*, *The Sneetches* grew out of Seuss's response to Hitler's agenda. In this case, he responded to Hitler's hatred of Jews. As Seuss told Jonathan Cott, *The Sneetches* "was inspired by my opposition to anti-Semitism." Seuss had skewered the Hitler's rampant anti-Semitism in several of the political cartoons he published in *PM* during the early 1940s. These cartoons referred directly to real people and real situations, but in *The Sneetches* Seuss took a more abstract approach to anti-Semitism.

*The Sneetches* tells the story of a society of bird-like creatures known as Sneetches. These creatures look very much alike, but they are divided into two groups: the Star-Belly Sneetches and the Plain-Belly Sneetches. In the beginning of the story, the Star-Belly Sneetches lord it over the Plain-Belly Sneetches. However, as the story progresses, a character named Sylvester McMonkey McBean arrives with a machine that can put stars on the Plain-Belly Sneetches. When they pay to have stars put on their bellies, the original Star-Belly Sneetches pay Sylvester McMonkey McBean to remove the stars from their bellies. Soon the Sneetches are adding and deleting stars at a dizzying rate, and one day they come to the realization that they could no longer tell each other apart. The story concludes with the following lines:

The Sneetches got really quite smart on that day,  
The day they decided that Sneetches are Sneetches  
And no kind of Sneetch is the best on the beaches.  
That day, all the Sneetches forgot about stars  
And whether they had one, or not, upon thars. (n. pag)

Several critics have suggested that by using stars to differentiate one group of Sneetches from another group of Sneetches, Seuss may well have been making reference to the Nazi's treatment of Jews (Spiegelman 63). Donald E. Pease comments on this point in his book titled *Theodor Seuss Geisel*. In writing about these critics' interpretation of *The Sneetches*, Pease explains that these critics saw the book "as an elaboration of the critique of anti-Semitism that Geisel had directed against Nazi Germany in his work at *PM*. . . . The Nazi use of yellow stars

to stigmatize Jews supplied these interpretations with seemingly indisputable evidence” (Pease 118-119).

In the years immediately following the publication of *Yertle the Turtle* and *The Sneetches*, these books did not attract widespread notice. Ruth K. MacDonald speculates that these “stories were lost amidst the critical attention devoted to ... [Dr. Seuss’s] “Beginner Books of the period” (MacDonald 12). However, with the publication of Richard H. Minear’s *Dr. Seuss Goes to War: The World War II Editorial Cartoons of Theodor Seuss Geisel* in 1999, *Yertle the Turtle* and *The Sneetches* became subjects of historical and political interest.

In *Dr. Seuss Goes to War*, Minear and Art Spiegelman (the author of the book’s introduction) comment on both *Yertle the Turtle* and *The Sneetches*, although they pay more attention to *Yertle the Turtle*. Minear and Spiegelman interpret these books as works of historical allegory. In the conclusion to his book, Minear discusses the ways in which Yertle symbolizes Hitler, but then Minear suggests that Seuss’s portrayal of Yertle is ultimately flawed:

The parallel with Hitler is far from exact. Although he, too, overextended himself, Hitler was toppled not from below but by outside force. And nowhere in *Yertle the Turtle* is there any reference to that other aspect of Hitler’s legacy, the Nazi Holocaust. To be sure, the current concern with the European Holocaust developed largely after 1958. Still, the question ... arises: Is Dr. Seuss’s Hitler adequate to the task of representing the real Hitler? (Minear 260)

Minear’s question is premised on the assumption that *Yertle the Turtle* is a work of historical allegory. In *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, H. W. Fowler states that an allegory involves extended metaphors that play out over the course of a “story of greater length” (Fowler 535). Characters function as symbols or they represent another person or stand in for a character from another story. For example, Aslan from C. S. Lewis’s *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* represents Jesus Christ. By interpreting *Yertle the Turtle* as a work of allegory, Minear equates Yertle with Hitler, and when this equation breaks down, Minear suggests that Seuss’s portrayal of Yertle is deficient.

Not everyone, however, interprets *Yertle the Turtle* and *The Sneetches* as works of allegory. Peter Dreier published an article in 2011 titled “Dr. Seuss’s Progressive Politics” in which he refers to these stories as “parables” against “despotism” and “bigotry” (30). In his guide to English usage, Fowler explains that a parable and an allegory both involve the use of metaphors, but a parable is a simpler story often intended for younger children. While parables include metaphors, the metaphors are not extended over a longer narrative. In Fowler’s words, a “parable is the fitter name for the illustrative story designed to answer a

single question or suggest a single principle, and offering a definite moral” (Fowler 535).

Fowler’s definition of a parable applies perfectly to *Yertle the Turtle* and *The Sneetches*. Seuss saw these books as having an instructive purpose. In fact, he told Cott that these books “came from the part of my soul that started out to be a teacher” (Cott 30). However, even though Seuss wrote both of these stories in response to Hitler and the rise of Nazism, his goal was not to create allegorical stories intended to teach children history lessons. Instead, set out to write two parables, each illustrating a particular principle. In *Yertle the Turtle*, Seuss told a simple story about standing up to despots. In *The Sneetches*, he told a simple story about the destructive and irrational nature of social discrimination. As is usually the case with parables, he concludes both stories, to quote Fowler, by “offering a definite moral.” *Yertle the Turtle* and *The Sneetches* offer concluding morals that speak to the Nazi period in German history, but they also apply our time and our world.

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